



## The Alternative

"My dear Miss Pembroke —"

"Drive us into the alley at the rear of Mr. Pembroke's house, please. We're going in through the kitchen, Mr. Van Pycke. There's to be a Christmas tree at three o'clock. You are to be Santa Claus. I'll secrete you in the butler's pantry until it is time for you to appear. Now, please don't object. We have the fur coat and the whiskers and the red cap. All you have to do is to come in and play you're delighted. You will read off the names and — now, *do* be nice! You know it will be great fun."

He could not resist the appeal in her eyes. It seemed to him that to be disagreeable about it — or even reluctant — would be the most dastardly crime imaginable. He caught the spirit.

"Great fun? It will be gorgeous!"

"Oh, lovely," she cried. "Hurry up, please. It's after two, and I still have to put some things on the tree."

She squeezed into the decrepit little hack, laughing joyously. He scrambled up beside Tobias, clinging manfully to less than ten inches of seat, a splendid grin on his face all the way across town, utterly oblivious to the curious stares of Christmas pedestrians who passed them by.

He was thinking only of her smile of delight and of the amazing change it had wrought in him — like a flash, so to speak. Already Christmas was beginning to mean a great deal to him.